

The Value at Stake in Engaging Communities to Build Healthy Parks and Healthy People Programs

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Robert Garcia, a national leader in the movement to bring healthy spaces to everybody—especially communities of color in urban settings—shares here the values at stake in creating healthy parks and healthy people. These values can be tapped to foster effective partnerships and community engagement to bring more healthy experiences to everyone and grow the next generation of park stewards in the process.

It is important to carefully articulate the values of what parks offer people in order to build common ground. Consider the needs and values of those you want to partner with—what they are excited or concerned about. In Robert’s work to bring more equitable recreational space to communities in Southern California and beyond, the following values have helped bring communities together. These values can be used like a toolkit – taking into consideration the approaches and angles that resonate best with the target audience being engaged.

1. The Value of Fun and Human Development. “Nobody takes fun seriously,” says Robert. His colleague said, “I can’t advocate for having fun. People will laugh at me.” Yet, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child says children have the right to play and recreation, and to be happy. In the United States, it wasn’t until advocates started articulating parks as a health issue that parks became a priority issue. To make the case for fun, it is about positioning your goals in a way that lines up with the goals of those you are trying to engage. For example: talking about recreation for kids in terms of “health and human development” means making the case that children who participate in physical education do better academically and graduate more frequently. In another example, people will join together to support a park if it creates community or drives out vandalism and crime.

2. Conservation Values. We can rally around the overwhelming data that show the need to conserve our natural resources, including clean air, water, and land, complete green streets with transit, biking, hiking, and safe routes to schools, saving habitat, and climate justice

3. Economic Values. The case can be made for careers in green jobs, in the parks, and in recreation. There is an opportunity to reinvent the idea of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal Era with Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell’s efforts to actualize a 21st Century Conservation Service Corps. Various factors play into the economic argument for parks and public lands—some positive, some negative—all are important to talk about with potential partners. Issues include: jobs and apprenticeships for youth, diversification of government contracts to involve local workforce, the ramifications of gentrification and potential displacement of lower income residents as greening improve their communities, and increasing home ownership and support for small business, among others. There are opportunities to realize the positive economic values and mitigate the negative ones in the park and public space planning process by working together with a wide range of stakeholders. Healthy and vital communities can be the outcome.

4. Art, Culture and Spiritual Values. Touting the role of art and parks in the life of a community can be a powerful convening idea. Parks can help people connect with or even create art. At monuments like those to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez, and in commemorations and celebrations of communities of color like Manzanar, and Mesa Verde, people are apt to connect to these places on a cultural level and the health and well-being message can be included.

5. Values of Equal Justice, Democracy and Healthy Living for All. Ultimately, we can appeal to the values that we strive to achieve as a community and democracy and emphasize the inherent democratic nature of public spaces.